“Spirals of Silence: Expressing Opinions When the Climate of Opinion is Unambiguous”

The purpose of this May 1996 study is to adapt Noelle-Neumann’s Spiral of Silence theory to the highly publicized opinions of the O. J. Simpson criminal trial. The study focused on the expressed opinions and the willingness to be quoted by both majority and minority group members about the trial.

Based on Noelle-Neumann’s theory, people will express their ideas and beliefs freely when they feel that their opinions are dominant. However, when their convictions lose favor, they feel less certain about their position. Studies have shown that the context and topic of opinion are large factors in the results of the evidence. It is hypothesized that the level of media use would predict one’s perceptions of the climate of opinion. In this field study, there was no ambiguity on the climate of opinion to prevent people from expressing their views to strangers about the trial. A large majority of Blacks thought Simpson was innocent, while a large majority of Whites believed he was guilty. Race played a large factor as it could significantly alter the spiral. Blacks might express their opinions differently towards Whites, than they would with other Blacks.

A: Hypotheses for Spirals Between and Within Groups Based on Fear of Sanctions A1: Blacks will be more likely to tell White strangers that O. J. Simpson is guilty,

relative to what they tell Black strangers.

A2: Whites will be more likely to tell Black strangers that O. J. Simpson is innocent, relative to what they tell White strangers.

B: Hypotheses for Spirals Between Groups Based on Presentation of a Public Face

B1: Blacks will be more likely to tell White strangers that O. J. Simpson is innocent, relative to what they tell Black strangers.

B2: Whites will be more likely to tell Black strangers that O. J. Simpson is guilty, relative to what they tell White strangers.

*Research Question*: Are there within-group (i.e., same race) versus between-group differences in people’s willingness to be quoted, expressed interest in (salience of) the Simpson case, and attention to media coverage of the Simpson case?

After the first trial had found Simpson “not guilty,” a field study was conducted to solicit public opinion if people thought Simpson was guilty or not. The design was to observe the willingness to give one’s opinion to a stranger rather than whether one would be willing to engage in a conversation. Using a quota system, White, Black, and Asian interviewers selected adults representing each racial group. Participants were chosen from diverse public settings in the Midwest. Interviewers were from a Cleveland State University research methods class. Respondents were asked if they believed O. J. Simpson was innocent or guilty, how certain they were, how interested they were in the trial and how much of the trial they watched on television. Participants were then given opportunities to express their opinions: first in writing, orally to the interviewer, and finally to a larger audience by research report or mass media. The purpose for which opinions were gathered was manipulated (class project, newspaper, etc.). The final stage of the interview asked the respondent if they would like to be quoted.

From a pool of 530 people, 62.6 percent said that they thought Simpson was guilty, while 37.4 percent believed he was innocent. When asked if they were interested in being quoted, 40.2 percent consented and 52.7 percent declined. There were clear distinctions between the three racial groups and their opinion on O. J. Simpson. When the interviewers and participants shared the same racial background, 70 percent believed that Simpson was guilty. Looking at only Black participants, there is no difference in the certainty of their opinion by the race of the interviewer. The factors in the results were the race of the interviewer, race of the participant, and public opinion condition. The hypotheses that were given were not concluded as being supported. The attempt to adapt the Spiral of Silence theory to a case of racially polarized opinions does not identify a spiral within groups. However there is strong evidence that the factor of race does affect one’s expressed opinion.

Media is becoming increasingly present in our society today. Future research should be aimed at how respondents view their opinion in the larger society. Issues differ in their importance depending on the individual and their personal experiences. In order to fully understand and identify the Spiral of Silence, we need to further look into all the possible factors that affect it.